

The English Article System : A Definite Problem in E.S.L. Composition Classes

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The English Article System : A Definite Problem in E.S.L. Composition Classes

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With the increasing emphasis on internationalism as well as the development of the world village, the composition teacher can expect to have international students in the classroom ; moreover, many of these international students may speak a native language that does not use a system of articles, or uses them in a manner that suggests a radically different grammatical logic than English. For example, Asian students often demonstrate little or no understanding of the use of articles — a problem that interferes with the conveyance of meaning when they write in English. On this matter, Randal Whitman observes that

The article in English has always been considered one of the most formidable problems to overcome in teaching English grammar to foreigners, and its misuse is one of the most evident grammatical signs that a person is not a native speaker of English. (253)

The communication problem presented by the omission, addition, or misuse of articles by international students appears in the following sentence written by a Vietnamese :

Last night I returned to the home.

Taken at face value, we assume that this student returned to some type

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of nursing home, funeral home, or a home for the mentally imbalanced. Placing the sentence into context further compounds the problem of determining an accurate meaning for "the home" or a destination for the Vietnamese student :

Last night, I returned to the home : My roommates were all study for the midterm test but they thought that pizza would be good to go have at a Waldos downtown.

Despite the verb tense mistake, the context now tells the reader that the student has roommates who may also be clients in the same specialized home ; furthermore, another imprecision with the use of an indefinite and definite articles develops the meaning that there must exist a number of "Waldos," and all of his roommates are going to take one — and only one — midterm examination (although one could counter that the student left out the plural "s" on "test," representing another problem for Asian students).

John Hewson, author of the succinct book : *Article and Noun in English*, summarizes why Asian students repeatedly misuse the English articles :

Those peoples who speak the languages of the Indo-European family have a remarkable facility [to use articles] not found to the same degree in other language communities and seemingly absent in some (e.g. Chinese)... (99)

Tuong, another Vietnamese student, exhibits confusion with the use of articles while explaining the importance of language :

I think, because speak is to express an ideal, things that the man wants or enjoys.

In this example, Tuong chose an article that is 180 degrees off the mark,

changing the generic sense of "man" to that of focused singularity. Use of the zero article would maintain the meaning of "man" as representing all mankind rather than a single, specific human.

Like many of the Vietnamese refugees in the United States, both of the above student writers are Chinese-Vietnamese who speak both the Chinese and Vietnamese languages which offer them little prior knowledge of western article usage.

Japanese students also struggle with the English article system :

We use a title with the name to show respect. Our greeting used to be this kind of traditional way, but it seems to be changing to informal. For example, if I go to the bar, then ask the waitress's name, she probably will say her first name.

In the above passage, the student has replaced an indefinite article with the definite article, making "the bar" sound as if there is only one bar in all of Osaka, the student's home town. A subsequent interview with the student clarified the fact that he frequented a number of different bars, confirming indeed that he misused the English article system.

Another Japanese student handles the definite article, but demonstrates some problems with the indefinite article and the zero article :

Although I was so nervous then, I can think now that not very many people can have such a strange and impressive experience on a New Year's Eve day. Also, my friend makes fun of the accident. But the situation is funny that American old car beat Japanese new car.

In the last sentence in the above example, the student writer omits the indefinite article preceding the phrases: "American old car" and "Japanese new car." Does this reflect failure to correctly use the zero article or the indefinite article? Or, in fact, is the student confused by the length of the phrase and fails to realize that an article is needed? One would be tempted to think that the zero article would manifest the

least difficulty for non-native speakers writing in English ; however, the use of the zero article requires a conscious choice in the same manner as using either the definite or indefinite articles, offering a distinct, separate meaning. On the contrastive quality of the zero article to the definite and indefinite articles, John Hewson suggests that

Without the limiting force of the article, the noun expresses its total potential significate, limited only by the context of situation. When such usage contrasts, i.e. yields a totally different sense from the usage with the article, then we may talk of an article zero, contrasting with, and complementing in the total system, the binary system of the indefinite and definite articles. (116)

While providing some diversion to English-speaking westerners as they fumble with the intricacies of eating with chopsticks, the following directions for the use of *ohashi* came from a recent trip to an *izakaya* (a traditional Japanese restaurant) :

1. Hold the first chopstick firm and stationary in fixed position.
2. The second chopstick is held like a pencil, with the tips of thumb, index and middle fingers. Manipulate this chopstick to meet the first chopstick.
3. This Manipulation will form "V" to pick up the food.

Of course, industry and advertisers — ever conscious of space and mental limitations — are notorious violators of accepted language usage (e.g. "Speak Lark" or "Feel Coke" or "Winston tastes good. . .," etc.), and perhaps are rivaled only by the linguistic endeavors of the military. However, the above example is offered not to make sport of the intrepid captains of media, but rather to discuss English article confusion outside of the classroom. In direction number one, little, if any, meaning is actually lost by the omission of the indefinite article immediately before "fixed," but the sentence reads like the U.S. military instructions for attaching a bayonet to an M-16 rifle: precise,

technical, and stripped of the natural rhythm of the English language. Example number two manages to offer a simple--but effective--simile as well as deletes the definite article preceding the coordinate series beginning with "thumb." This time, meaning is lost. What thumb, index, and middle fingers are meant? On both hands or one hand? Perhaps part three will clarify the situation. But instead of clarification we find either misuse of the zero article or a forgotten indefinite article preceding the letter "V"; moreover, the upper-case "M" deifies the word "manipulation" and gives us the sense that the secret of using chopsticks (and also English articles) may rest in the hands of the gods (fortunately, pictures accompanied the above set of instructions). Without being able to consult with the author of these examples, it would be difficult to determine what intention underwrote the above article selections, or what type of interference his native language may have asserted during the composing process.

Finally, the controversy still continues over whether or not "dialect interference" has a direct influence on the production or errors by student E.S.L. writers (Farr 68); some studies, however, clearly demonstrate that native languages can cause interference errors in the target language (Miura 82). Since a number of Asian languages function without an article system, the E.S.L. composition teacher must be prepared to deal with the issue of teaching the article in light of the fact that a considerable portion of the interference errors will arise from a misunderstanding of English article usage. However, most American composition instructors would not be overly surprised to discover similar errors in the writing of their students born and raised in the United States, and the late Mina Shaughnessy in her book: *Errors and Expectations* warns us that American basic writing students often have a "quasi-foreign relationship to the language that they are trying to write" (92). In this regard, the E.S.L. and other composition teachers will need a good battery of projects and techniques to effectively teach the English article system.

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